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Cal EMA Secretary Matthew Bettenhausen Testifies Before Congresssional Committee In Support Of US&R Teams

WASHINGTON – Cal EMA Secretary Matthew Bettenhausen testified before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management today on the critical role FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Program plays in our country's emergency response capacity, as well the teams' integral response to the heart wrenching international disaster in Haiti.

Currently, there are 28 US&R teams that make up the national program across the United States, with eight local government based teams in California. These teams answer the need for coordinated, multi-disciplinary emergency response in the event of naturally occurring or man-made disaster. The US&R Task Force 2 from Los Angeles recently returned from several weeks in Haiti, where they found and rescued nine survivors in the rubble and performed many other critical rescue operations. In all, the U.S. US&R response is credited with rescuing 43 survivors.

"We are very proud of our US&R team and their efforts in Haiti. Our hearts and prayers go out to the people of Haiti who are suffering such unbelievable human tragedy," said Secretary Bettenhausen. "Governor Schwarzenegger has directed Cal EMA to help the Haitian people in any way possible and take action to learn from the tragedy so our state is better prepared for disasters."

Urban Search and Rescue teams are part of the multi-pronged approach to public safety in the event of a disaster in California. The diversified training the teams receive prepares them to address the search and rescue emergency response for a variety of disasters, including, but not limited to, flooding, earthquake and landslide. In fact, California's US&R teams joined those from other states in responding to the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the Kansas grain elevator explosion in 1998, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and Hurricane Katrina.

Secretary Bettenhausen also spoke in support of provisions in HR 3377, the legislation that would ensure federal level support for the continuance of the national US&R program. In its Report to Congress, the Department of Homeland Security/FEMA US&R Program office noted that the annual and recurring cost for each task force is \$1,662,200. Cooperative agreement funding for fiscal year 2008 is just over \$1 million, leaving economically strained local supporting agencies to subsidize approximately \$600,000.

"Since January 2006, California alone has experienced 43 federally declared disasters and 55 state declared disasters," stated Secretary Bettenhausen. "We have learned from these disasters and have taken measures to substantially enhance our response and recovery capabilities. The US&R teams are a critical part of that effort."

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